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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: Last debates before Iowa

Monday's first-in-the-nation caucus initial test

By Rob Burgess
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Earlier this month, both parties held their first primary debates of 2016.

Republicans still have one more debate Thursday at the Iowa Events Center in Des Moines before Monday's first-in-the-nation Iowa Caucus, but for the Democrats, that's it.

GOP UNDERCARD

The sixth Republican undercard debate was hosted by Trish Regan and Sandra Smith of Fox Business News on Jan. 14 in the North Charleston Coliseum and Performing Arts Center in North Charleston, South Carolina. Only three candidates appeared: former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina. Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul made the cut for the undercard, but boycotted. Dec. 29, 2015, former New York Gov. George Pataki dropped out. (Former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore hasn't been seen since the first debate.)

Huckabee didn't seem bothered to be there. Fiorina and Santorum were thirsty. "Unlike another woman in this race, I actually love spending time with my husband," said Fiorina. Santorum, doing a lot of yelling, said he wants to tear up the Iran deal on his first day. At various points he also awkwardly made Citadel cadets stand and fantasized about elaborate terror scenarios.

Losers: All.

Highlight: Fiorina: "You cannot wait to see the debate between me and Hillary Clinton. You would pay to see that fight."

GOP PRIMETIME

The prime time debate, hosted by Neil Cavuto and Maria Bartiromo, had seven participants: Donald Trump, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, Florida Sen. Marco

Rubio, Dr. Ben Carson, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Ohio Gov. John Kasich. Bush needs a nap. Kasich is flailing. Carson closes his eyes more than I'm comfortable with.

Christie called the State of the Union speech "story time with Barack Obama" and declared Clinton wouldn't "get within 10 miles of the White House" if nominated. Not surprisingly, Christie doesn't know history very well. "I don't think the founders put the Second Amendment as No. 2 by accident," he said. Wrong.

"The Bill of Rights has an order, but it has nothing to do with the relative importance of the rights," reported Slate's Brian Palmer Dec. 20, 2012. "They come in the same order as the sections of the Constitution that they would have modified." Trump and Cruz debated Cruz's presidential eligibility before being interrupted by Rubio. "I hate to interrupt this episode of Court TV," said Rubio to peels of laughter. (Which was a network, not a show.)

People kept falsely hearing their name mentioned in order to get more screen time. Cruz raised Trump's "New York values." Trump flipped Cruz for real when he invoked 9/11 in response. Cruz had to clap for the first-responders while being attacked.

Winners: Trump, Rubio.

Losers: Cruz, Carson, Bush, Kasich, Christie.

Highlight: Trump, gesturing at head: “I want to use that same up here, whatever it may be, to make America rich again, and to make America great again.”

DEMOCRATS

The fourth Democratic debate, hosted by YouTube and NBC News' Lester Holt and Andrea Mitchell, was held Jan. 17 at the Gaillard Center in Charleston, South Carolina. This short debate was held on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders called for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton disingenuous in describing his gun record. Former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley said both are inconsistent. O'Malley was stepped on repeatedly by Clinton, who boxed him out with her body language.

Clinton, who advertises herself as a package deal with her husband, also makes herself vulnerable to attacks on his character. In a moment reminiscent of his free pass on her email issues in the first debate, Sanders declined to use Bill Clinton's sexual behavior as a weapon. In her closing statement, Clinton said she sent her top aide to address the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. As if she's president already.

Winners: Sanders, Clinton.

Loser: O'Malley.

Highlight: “Is there anything that you really wanted to say tonight that you haven't gotten a chance to say?” asked Holt. “We're going to have to get 20 minutes to do it,” said O'Malley.

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